

A Civic Theology for the South: The Case of Benjamin M. Palmer

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When Henry L. Mencken called the nation's attention to the southern Bible belt, he was pointing to a phenomenon rooted squarely in the white South's defense of slavery between 1830 and 1865. He was also unveiling a region defined by a self-conscious manipulation of the two principal understandings of God in ante-bellum America—"Nature's God," the creation of the Deists,¹ and Jehovah, God of the Bible. By the dawn of the nineteenth century, these two concepts had been thoroughly synthesized in the popular imagination to form the bedrock of America's civic theology.

The synthesis of the two concepts was the result of two earlier developments, one philosophical and one experiential, which coalesced and intertwined in the eighteenth century. Rationally-oriented philosophers and theologians throughout the eighteenth century had cloaked Jehovah in the garb of reason and of nature in an effort to make him more rational and more palatable. Then, with the experiential quest for liberty first in the Great Awakening and later in the Revolution, there was a tendency for God and his apparel to become inverted so that the old garb often became the new substance, and the old substance often became the new garb. Many apologists for civil and religious liberty now staked their claim to freedom on Nature's God whom they dressed and adorned in the apparel of the biblical Jehovah who, in turn, was rendered increasingly rational in the early nineteenth century by the Baconian thinkers of the com-

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1. Cf. Herbert of Cherbury, *De Veritate*, 1624.

mon sense tradition.² Eventually, Nature's God became biblical and Jehovah became both natural and rational, and a theological synthesis was erected that would be the basis of America's civic theology from the Revolution to the Civil War.

The synthesis, however, was contrived, in a way, and even somewhat awkward, since Nature's God presided over a kingdom of supposed universal values, while Jehovah ruled in a realm of explicitly Christian particularities. The fundamental differences, however, were obscured by one common certainty: the new nation was a virtual recovery of an ancient primordium, pristine and pure, standing at the fountainhead of time. In the primordial context, Christ's particularities and Nature's universalities were blended together in the conviction that both were expressions of the first age. From that perspective, there was little difference between proclaiming liberty and egalitarianism, on the one hand, and Christ, the Bible, and the church, on the other hand; all, in one way or another, reflected the natural order that was thought to exist at the time of creation.³

All of that, however, was well before the early 1830s, when the white South's enthusiasm for liberty, with respect to one segment of humankind, dramatically and abruptly waned. The commitment now was not so much to liberty as it was to liberty's antagonist: slavery. No god who ruled over Nature's universal kingdom of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" for "all men" could possibly be the patron-deity of this new commitment to human bondage. Nor were white southerners fooled by the fact that Nature's god was dressed in Jehovah's apparel. He was still the God of liberty for all men and, as such, would never do for their region. No wonder, then, that Robert Lewis Dabney, a Presbyterian theologian at Hampden-Sydney College, took his stand squarely on the Bible and wrote in 1851, "Here is our policy then, to push the Bible argument continually, to drive Abolitionism to the wall, to compel it to assume an anti-Christian position."⁴ In this, Dabney was typical of southern clerics.

2. Dwight Bozeman, *Protestants in an Age of Science: The Baconian Ideal and Antebellum American Religious Thought* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1977), pp. 23-31, demonstrates the growing importance of the Baconian creation of the common sense realists in early nineteenth-century America.

3. Cf. Richard T. Hughes, "From Civil Dissent to Civil Religion and Beyond," *Religion in Life* 49 (Autumn 1980):268-88 for an analysis of the pertinence of primordial constructs for the American situation through the nineteenth century, and an elaboration of how Christ's particularities and Nature's universalities were blended into an American primordium in the early nineteenth century.

4. Cited in H. Shelton Smith, Robert T. Handy, and Lefferts A. Loetscher, *American Christianity: An Historical Interpretation with Representative Documents*, vol. 2 (New York:

The task of the white, southern clergy, therefore, was essentially three-fold: to strip Nature's God of his Christian clothing, leaving him naked in his infidelity; to bring the biblical Jehovah south of the Potomac to rule over his new, latter-day Israel; and finally, to argue that this grim God of the South was actually far older than the God of Nature who was simply a modern-day invention of northern skeptics, atheists, and infidels, and therefore, not God at all.

White southerners effectively dissolved, for their own region, the natural rights/biblical synthesis that had formed the basis for America's civic theology since the Revolution. Essentially, the white South took its stand on the biblical strand of that tradition to the near exclusion of deism and the natural rights tradition. Clement Eaton notes that "deism was dying a natural death in the South in the first quarter of the nineteenth century,"⁵ and Brooks Holifield observes that during the 1830s, "the South's nascent liberal movements were on the verge of collapse."⁶ This is all the more significant since, as Holifield notes, "the Old South in post-Revolutionary America was no Bible Belt"⁷ and was rife with skepticism, indifference, and infidelity. If, however, by the 1830s, Nature's God was departing Dixie, the southern clergy nonetheless defended their biblical Jehovah with a new form of rationalism: the Baconian philosophy of the Scottish common sense realists.⁸ Consequently, Thomas R. Dew, president of William and Mary College, could report in 1836 that the case was now closed: "Avowed infidelity is now considered by the enlightened portion of the world as a reflection both on the head and heart. The Humes and Voltaires have been vanquished from the field. . . . The argument is now closed forever, and he who obtrudes on the social circle his infidel notions, manifests the arrogance of a literary coxcomb, or that want of refinement which distinguishes the polished gentleman."⁹ By 1860, as Eaton notes, "the profound orthodoxy of the

Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963), p. 177. Cf. Donald Mathews, "We Who Own Slaves Honor God's Law," in *Religion in the Old South* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), pp. 136-84.

5. Clement Eaton, *The Freedom of Thought Struggle in the Old South* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), p. 303.

6. E. Brooks Holifield, *The Gentleman Theologians: American Theology in Southern Culture, 1795-1860* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1978), p. 50.

7. Ibid.

8. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 110-54, for the importance of common sense realism for the southern theologians.

9. Thomas R. Dew, *Southern Literary Messenger* 2 (November 1836):768, cited in Eaton, *The Freedom of Thought Struggle*, pp. 300-301.

South . . . was revealed by the virtual absence of liberal sects below the Potomac."¹⁰ Most telling was that while free-thought and deism had done well in the South early in the nineteenth century, by 1860, the South could claim only 20 of the nation's 664 Universalist churches, and only 3 of the nation's 257 Unitarian societies.¹¹ Clearly, the white South had created its own civic theology that now embraced the mainstream southern denominations in a virtual evangelical consensus. Significantly, this development began in the 1830s, precisely when the South was becoming increasingly defensive over slavery.

THE PRIMORDIUM

As has been the case so often in the American experience, the southerners attempted to legitimate their civic theology by rooting it in a primordial frame of reference. The striking dimension of the white southern primordium was its complexity; it did not draw from one symbol or from a single set of symbols, but rather from at least five symbols uncritically interwoven to form one coherent pattern of meaning. Those five included: (1) the experience of ancient Israel, inasmuch as many southerners increasingly came to think of the South as God's new Israel in these latter days; (2) the ancient Jewish patriarchs, and especially Noah, who became the pattern for the patriarchal dimension of plantation life as well as for "the curse of Ham"; (3) the primitive church, inasmuch as many white southerners thought that the South alone preserved the church in its ancient purity and simplicity; (4) the Puritan fathers of new England from whose fidelity to God, according to many southerners, the founding fathers of the American nation had utterly departed; and (5) the political faith of those otherwise heretical American founding fathers. Thus, the multifaceted constellation of primordial symbols—Jewish patriarchs, ancient Israel, primitive church, Puritan fathers, and founding fathers—became the lodestone of the white, southern identity worked out in defense of the "peculiar institution."

The white, southern clergy, who wielded tremendous influ-

10. Eaton, *The Freedom of Thought Struggle*, p. 316.

11. *The Eighth Census of the United States, 1860: Mortality and Miscellaneous Statistics* (Washington, D.C., 1866), pp. 500-501, and *The Monthly Journal of the American Unitarian Association, January, 1860* (Boston, 1860), pp. 37-41, cited in Eaton, *The Freedom of Thought Struggle*, p. 316. Eaton notes that the three Unitarian societies were in Louisville, New Orleans, and Charleston, though the latter was without a pastor.

ence over southern hearts and minds during the Civil War period, articulated this complex mythology with astounding zeal. Some of the preachers emphasized some of these themes more than others, but no single preacher was more zealous in his pursuit of all the themes than was Benjamin Morgan Palmer (1818-1902). Palmer was the son of a Presbyterian minister in Charleston, South Carolina; a product of Amherst, the University of Georgia, and Columbia Seminary in Columbia, South Carolina; the first moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America; and pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in New Orleans from 1856 until 1902. While there was probably no single preacher who was totally representative of all of the various strands of the white southern civic theology during the war years, Palmer came as close as any.¹²

Any primordial theology must take seriously the notion of a fall from an original state of pristine purity. For Palmer, the North clearly had fallen from "all that is ancient and stable" and threatened to pull the South from her Edenic purity into the abyss as well.¹³ "We have seen," he observed in his famous Thanksgiving Day sermon of 1860, "the trail of the serpent five and twenty years in our Eden."¹⁴ Palmer was determined to rid Eden of these vipers. It was on Thanksgiving Day, 1860, in the sanctuary of the First Presbyterian Church, New Orleans, that he launched an ongoing campaign to crush the head of the northern serpent. If there had ever been any credibility to his

12. Two theses and one dissertation have been written on Benjamin Palmer: Wayne Carter Eubank, "Benjamin M. Palmer: A Southern Divine" (thesis, Louisiana State University, 1943); John William Lancaster, "Presbyterian Preaching in Time of Crisis: Benjamin M. Palmer" (thesis, Austin Presbyterian Seminary, 1960); and Doralyn Joanne Hickey, "Benjamin Morgan Palmer: Churchman of the Old South" (Ph.D. dissertation, Duke University, 1962). The best work providing a context for Palmer's civic theology is James W. Silver, *Confederate Morale and Church Propaganda* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1967). A more recent work on southern civic theology in the post-war period is Charles Reagan Wilson, *Baptized in Blood: The Religion of the Lost Cause, 1865-1920* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1980); see also Mark A. Noll, "The Image of the United States as a Biblical Nation, 1776-1865," in Nathan O. Hatch and Mark A. Noll, *The Bible in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 39-58.

13. Palmer, "The South: Her Peril and Her Duty," 29 November 1860, in Thomas Cary Johnson, *The Life and Letters of Benjamin Morgan Palmer* (Richmond: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1906), p. 207. For an analysis of this sermon, see Wayne C. Eubank, "Benjamin Morgan Palmer's Thanksgiving Sermon, 1860," in J. Jeffery Auer, ed., *Antislavery and Disunion, 1858-1861* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), pp. 291-309.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 215.

claim that "I have never intermeddled with political questions"¹⁵ before, the Thanksgiving Day sermon changed all that. In ringing tones, he assailed the northern infidels and held up the cause of the South as the cause of God and the ancient traditions. The sermon was published three times in the next four days in the New Orleans *Daily Delta*. When it was published the third time, the publisher sought to justify the repetition by citing "a demand which seems yet far from exhausted, although the supply from this office alone has exceeded thirty thousand copies."¹⁶ Further, many other papers in New Orleans, Louisiana, and the Southwest published either summaries of the sermon or its complete text, and the sermon was soon circulating throughout the South as a pamphlet under various headings and titles.¹⁷ No wonder George Junkin, a northern writer, described Palmer in 1863 as one of "the leading spirits of the rebellion" who contributed immeasurably to the southern secession.¹⁸

PURITANS

Palmer clearly stated the theme of the fall and the restoration in a sermon in 1861. The early Puritans in America, he argued, simply sought to be free to worship God. "After the lapse of a century and a half," however, when the Constitution was written, "there was a total ignoring of the divine claims and of all allegiance to the divine supremacy. . . ." This omission was not due, Palmer argued, "to the irreligiousness of the masses, for they were predominantly christian. But the public leaders of the time were largely tinctured with the free-thinking and infidel spirit which . . . brought forth at last its bitter fruit in the horrors of the French Revolution." Consequently, though the earliest Puritan settlements had begun with a profound faith in God, when the American nation was born she "stood up before the world a helpless orphan, and entered upon its career without a God."¹⁹

15. *Ibid.*, p. 208.

16. Johnson, *The Life and Letters of Benjamin Morgan Palmer*, p. 222.

17. Hickey, "Benjamin Morgan Palmer," p. 67. Cf. also Eubank, "Benjamin Morgan Palmer's Thanksgiving Sermon, 1860," pp. 305-9.

18. George Junkin, *Political Fallacies: An Examination of the False Assumptions, and Refutation of the Sophistical Reasonings, Which Have Brought on this Civil War* (New York: C. Scribner, 1863), p. 189, cited in Hickey, "Benjamin Morgan Palmer," p. 191.

19. Palmer, "National Responsibility Before God" (New Orleans: Price-Current Steam Book and Job Printing Office, 1861), pp. 11-13, a discourse delivered on the Day of Fasting, Humiliation and Prayer, appointed by the president of the Confederate States of America, 13 June 1861.

Though the masses had been "predominantly christian" in 1776, by 1860, the free-thinking infidel spirit had pervaded the entire northern region and had provided the undergirding ideology of abolitionism. "The abolition spirit," Palmer proclaimed, "is undeniably atheistic. The demon which erected its throne upon the guillotine in the days of Robespierre and Marat, which abolished the Sabbath and worshipped reason in the person of a harlot, yet survives to work other horrors . . ." Southerners should not be fooled by the "old threadbare disguise of the advocacy of human rights." Indeed, the South must recognize deistic infidelity for what it is—a power that "blasphemously invades the prerogatives of God, and rebukes the Most High for the errors of his administration."²⁰

While Palmer stated this in his Thanksgiving Day sermon of 1860, he was sounding the same themes as early as 1845 when he warned a University of Georgia audience of the "introduction of Infidelity by means of Pseudo-Reformations. . . ." He raised for his audience "a question for grave and deep thought, whether Satan under the disguise of a Reformer may not be playing a deep game with the destinies of men and of nations." He warned of an impending fall when he asserted that "no more fatal calamity can befall a people than to have false moral principles, substituted for the true."²¹

Consequently, even when the war was over and the South had suffered humiliating defeat, Palmer could still argue that the purpose of the South had not been so much to defend slavery "as to oppose the subtle species of infidelity, which sought to accomplish its overthrow by assumptions which placed the whole Bible as an authoritative and final revelation, under the feet of profane scoffers."²²

Like most of his clerical colleagues of the South, however, Palmer did not impugn all forms of rationalism. Quite to the contrary, he hailed Baconian philosophy as an essentially biblical and Protestant perspective that provided the only rational guide to interpreting Scripture aright.²³ This common sense approach

20. Palmer, "The South: Her Peril and Her Duty," in Johnson, *The Life and Letters of Benjamin Morgan Palmer*, pp. 212-13.

21. Palmer, "Influence of Religious Belief Upon National Character" (Athens: Banner Office, 1845), p. 29, an oration delivered before the Demosthenian and Phi Kappa Societies of the University of Georgia, 7 August 1845.

22. Palmer, article no. 13, *South-Western Presbyterian* (11 November 1869), p. 2, cited in Hickey, "Benjamin Morgan Palmer," p. 228.

23. Palmer articulated the link he saw between Protestantism, the Bible, and Baconianism in an 1852 address at Davidson College, published under the title, "Baconianism and

to Scripture would serve Palmer well when he fashioned his biblical defense of slavery. In the meantime, however, infidelity was another matter altogether.

Palmer's depiction of a fall from the pristine purity of the early Puritan settlements into the apostasy of infidelity and atheism was by no means singular or unique in the Civil War South. The Reverend Thomas Smyth, preaching before the Second Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina, 21 November 1860, argued that the fall was due to "atheists, infidels, communists, free-lovers, rationalists, Bible haters, anti-christian levellers, and anarchists."²⁴ While Palmer impugned the Constitution alone as godless and atheistic, Smyth impugned the Declaration of Independence. "The evil and bitter root of all our evils is to be found in the infidel, atheistic, French Revolution, Red Republican principle, embodied as an axiomatic seminal principle—not in the Constitution, but in the Declaration of Independence." The problem, Smyth explained, is the Declaration's doctrine of fundamental human equality. "All men are not born equal," he argued. "The only equality is, that all men are born in sin." Thus, God's name in the Declaration was simply window dressing. "Though God is introduced, the Declaration is Godless. God is introduced to give dignity and emphasis; to create man, and to ordain government; and then He is banished. The sceptre is torn from his hands, and fictions are substituted for facts."²⁵

Southern preachers generally agreed that a fall from the

the Bible," in two separate sources: *Southern Presbyterian Review*, 1852, pp. 226-53, and a separate tract published in Columbia, South Carolina, 1852. For a discussion of Palmer's position vis-à-vis Baconianism and common sense realism, see Bozeman, *Protestants*, pp. 128-31.

24. Thomas Smyth, "The Sin and the Curse; or, the Union, The True Source of Disunion, and our Duty in the Present Crisis" (Charleston: Steam Power Presses of Evans and Cogswell, 1860), p. 8, a discourse preached on the occasion of the Day of Humiliation and Prayer appointed by the Governor of South Carolina, 21 November 1860.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 13. It is ironic that at least some northern preachers took almost precisely the same position vis-à-vis Puritanism and infidelity as did the southern preachers, but merely reversed the proper regional loci of the two traditions. Horace Bushnell is a case in point. Bushnell lamented the omission of God from the Constitution and claimed that the Declaration was "an atheistic bill." The root cause of the Civil War, he said, was the substitution of the sovereignty of the people for the sovereignty of God that, in turn, led to the State Rights doctrine of the South. Bushnell clearly recognized the synthesis of Jehovah and the God of Nature or, as he put it, of "New England and Virginia," and he sought to separate the two with fully as much vigor as did Palmer or Thomas Smyth. Unlike the southerners, however, Bushnell contended that Jehovah rightly belonged in the North while Nature's God was sovereign over the South. Cf. Sidney E. Mead, *The Old Religion in the Brave New World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), pp. 99-104.

American garden of Eden had occurred when the wily serpent offered the founding fathers the forbidden fruit of deism and infidelity. Benjamin Palmer was not utterly dismayed, however, for a restoration of the God of Israel, the church, and the early American Puritans was being accomplished in the Confederate South. He made this point unmistakably clear in 1861:

Thanks be unto God, my brethren, for the grace given our own Confederacy, in receding from this perilous atheism! When my eye first rested upon the Constitution adopted by the Confederate Congress, and I read in the first lines of our organic and fundamental law a clear, solemn, official recognition of Almighty God, my heart swelled with unutterable emotions of gratitude and joy. It was the return of the prodigal to the bosom of his father, of the poor exile who has long pined in some distant and bleak Siberia after the associations of his childhood home. At length, the nation has a God: Alleluia! "the Lord reigneth let the earth rejoice."²⁶

ISRAEL

Because of the restoration of pure and undefiled religion in the Confederate South, Palmer clearly depicted the South as a new Israel. He compared the South to the ancient Hebrews when they "pronounced the solemn Amen to the curses and blessings of the divine law as proclaimed by the Levites. Not less grand and awful is this scene today, when an infant nation strikes its covenant with the God of Heaven"²⁷ He went on to affirm that "our whole people through eleven States are called to ratify the covenant, and to set up the memorial stone thereof."²⁸

The new Israel motif was a theme to which Palmer returned again and again. In a 1862 funeral sermon for General Maxcy Gregg, he compared the invasion of the South by northern troops to the invasion of Judah by Sennacherib's armies. When Sennacherib advised Hezekiah to cease trusting in God, "God answered, 'Because thy rage against me is come up into mine ears, therefore I will put my hook in thy nose, and my bridle in thy lips, and will turn thee back by the way by which thou camest.'" Then Palmer drew the parallel. The issue confronting the South was clear: "Grand as the contest is when our firesides and our altars are the stake, it rises into the sublime and awful when the question is whether God shall reign, or take into his privy

26. Palmer, "National Responsibility Before God," p. 13.

27. Ibid., pp. 5-6. For the southern preachers' concept of the South as a chosen people, see Silver, *Confederate Morale and Church Propaganda*, pp. 25-41.

28. Palmer, "National Responsibility Before God," p. 13.

council the hypocritical and infidel fanatic of the North What [other] nation, save Judah alone, ever had such trusts committed to its hands? And what nation ever had such cause to spread its hands unto heaven, and to feel that the battle is not theirs, but God's?"²⁹

In an 1863 fast-day sermon delivered to the General Assembly of South Carolina, Palmer personified his legislative hearers as Israel, herself, and applied to the South words from Moses' farewell address (Deut. 33:27-28): Oh Israel, "... the eternal God is thy refuge, . . . and He shall thrust out the enemy from before thee, and shall say, destroy them. Israel then, shall dwell in safety alone; the fountain of Jacob shall be upon a land of corn and wine; also His heavens shall drop [down] dew."³⁰ It would be surprising if the analogy of Israel leaving Egyptian bondage had escaped Palmer's imagination, and it did not: "Eleven tribes sought to go forth in peace from the house of political bondage: but the heart of our modern Pharaoh is hardened, that he will not let Israel go. In their distress, with the untried sea before and the chariots of Egypt behind, ten millions of people stretch forth their hands before Jehovah's throne, imploring him to 'stir up his strength before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh, and come and save them.'"³¹

PRIMITIVE CHRISTIANITY

Not only in Palmer's thought was the South a restoration of ancient Israel standing in a covenantal relation to God, she also was a haven for the restoration of a pure and ancient Christianity, enshrined in the pages of the Bible, in the face of the northern, infidel apostasy. Pure Christianity meant for Palmer a reliance on the sovereignty of God, expressed in the Bible and the Bible alone, thereby excluding all religious innovations and inventions of men. Unlike Alexander Campbell, however, who turned the searchlight of this criterion to the worship and polity of the church, Palmer turned it to God's will for the social order. In other words, the Bible became a constitution governing the behavior of society. One of the primary tasks of the

29. Palmer, "Address Delivered at the Funeral of General Maxcy Gregg," 20 December 1862 (Columbia, S.C.: Southern Guardian Steam Power Press, 1863), p. 10.

30. Palmer, "A Discourse Before the General Assembly of South Carolina," 10 December 1863 (Columbia, S.C.: Charles P. Pelham, State Printer, 1864), p. 24, appointed by the Legislature as a Day of Fasting, Humiliation, and Prayer.

31. Palmer, "National Responsibility Before God," p. 5.

church was to encourage the fidelity of the political and social structures to this ancient and divine constitution. Any lapse from the guidelines of this constitution was apostasy, and it was precisely apostasy into which the North had descended.

Palmer's common sense presuppositions compelled him to believe that the ancient, biblical constitution was not really to be interpreted, but that it simply means what it says and says what it means. It also followed that a godly society was static and continuous with godly societies throughout the ages. Thus, there was a logical, and even divine, continuity running from Israel to the ancient church, to the Puritan communities of New England, and finally to the South. Further, this meant that of supreme importance was the retaining of the godly, status quo. Reforming or tampering with a godly society was almost, by definition, heretical and apostate. Therefore, as long as society followed the ancient, biblical constitution satisfactorily, the church's task was simply to encourage prayer, praise, and pious living. Paradoxically, while encouraging social and political fidelity to the ancient biblical blueprint, southern churches were estranged from the political sphere, nurturing an almost pietistic irrelevance to the social order around them.

This southern paradox, rooted in a peculiar application of Scottish common sense philosophy to the biblical text, helps explain why southern religion, as Samuel S. Hill has recently pointed out,³² has turned more on a pietistic satisfaction with the political status quo than it has on political and social reform. It also explains why Benjamin Palmer could be extraordinarily involved in political pronouncements, while at the same time accusing northern churchmen who espoused political and social causes of apostasy from the ancient order. Palmer was simply preserving the primordial status quo while the northerners were promoting the inventions and innovations of men. Thus, in 1858, Palmer warned that the American nation, while theretofore largely continuous with the primal status quo, was falling from the primordial to a merely historical sphere. He hailed the "eighty years [during which] the state has been free from . . . complication with the spiritual power" as a period wherein Christianity had thrived as never before since the apostolic age. In these latter days, however, the pulpit had been "converted into a political rostrum, and the ambassadors of heaven degraded

32. Samuel S. Hill, Jr., *The South and the North in American Religion* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1980), pp. 30-31.

into jobbing politicians. . . ."³³ Only in the South was the primordial purity of the church preserved.

In a sermon delivered before the Georgia Legislature in 1863, Palmer argued that the key to the preservation of any nation is the preservation of a pure church, continuous with its primal beginnings. He claimed that there has never been a single instance, in ancient or modern times, when "a nation has been destroyed, holding in her bosom a pure and uncorrupted church." He went on to argue that "so long as with sound doctrine, and a pure worship, and uncontaminated ordinances, she fulfills the mission to which she is appointed, just so long will the nation which enshrines and protects her be sheltered from destruction."³⁴

In all of this, there implicitly was assurance for Palmer that the South would prevail in her war for secession. In a clear and lucid rendition of a southern civic theology, Palmer told the South Carolina General Assembly:

The preeminent grandeur of this war is found in the fact that it centres upon a religious idea. On the one hand is a wicked infidelity, lifting its rebellious arm against the Ruler of the universe; and on the other, humble loyalty, receiving the blow, and offering itself a sacrifice to His insulted majesty. Patriotism is sanctified by religion, which from her sacred horn pours upon it the oil of consecration. Can we doubt the issue of such a conflict? . . . that in the end the wicked will be trampled in His fury³⁵

The North had simply ignored the judgments of God and the Bible on every hand. When Palmer observed in 1852 how infidels dominated science and philosophy, the northern dimensions of this academic infidelity, for this late a date, were implicit. This unbelieving sort of science, Palmer charged, "simply handles its fossils and ignores the Bible. Putting on its wise spectacles, it reads off . . . the world's chronology in millions and billions of years, just as calmly as though God had never written a book, in which was set down the age of man."³⁶ Clearly, such a godless society could never prevail.

33. Palmer, "Our Historic Mission" (New Orleans: "True Witness" Office, 1859), p. 19, an address delivered before the Eunomian and Phi-Mu Societies of La Grange Synodical College, 7 July 1858.

34. Palmer, "The Rainbow Round the Throne; or Judgment Tempered with Mercy" (Milledgeville, Ga.: Doughton, Nisbet, and Barnes, State Printers, 1863), p. 29, a discourse before the Legislature of Georgia, delivered on the Day of Fasting, Humiliation, and Prayer, appointed by the president of the Confederate States of America, 27 March 1863.

35. Palmer, "A Discourse Before the General Assembly of South Carolina," p. 22.

36. Palmer, "Baconianism and the Bible" (Columbia, S.C.: A. S. Johnston, 1852), p. 28, an address delivered before the Eumenean and Philanthropic Societies of Davidson College, 11 August 1852.

Palmer's implicit assumption that society should be governed by the ancient biblical constitution reached its zenith when he argued before the Georgia Legislature in 1863 that the house of the Confederate States of America would never be fully in order until brought under the kingship and dominion of Jesus Christ. He now substantially amended his fast-day sermon of 1861 to argue that when the Confederacy had recognized God in its Constitution, it still had failed to acknowledge the whole truth. Clearly recognizing the distinction between the "God of Nature" and "Jehovah, God of the Bible," Palmer urged upon his hearers that "this national confession fails to define whether the God we invoke be 'Jehovah[,] Jove[,] or Lord,'—whether the God of the Pantheist, the Pagan, the Christian, or the Deist." He went on to argue that the Confederate Constitution did not really recognize the fact that the ultimate "king, whose footsteps are seen in all the grand march of history, is God in Christ—ruling the world by the double right of creation and redemption" Therefore, he pressed upon the legislators "to take this young nation as it passes through its baptism of blood, and to seal its loyalty to Christ at the altar of God."³⁷

Only minutes before Palmer had delivered this address to the Georgia Legislature, George Foster Pierce, bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, had urged the same point upon the same assembly of lawmakers. Pierce contended that while common sentiment all along had supposed that America had been a Christian nation, this was not the case. The principles upon which American government and legislation had been based, he said, ignored all reference to God and his universal law. In point of fact, the Confederate Constitution, "in its appeal to Almighty God, . . . uses the language of deism, or natural religion, rather than of christianity." Then, in a devastating paradox, Pierce argued that while he did not wish to see the church established by law or a religious creed enforced upon the citizens, nonetheless, "I do believe that, in the organic law, God should be acknowledged in his being, perfections, providence and empire; not as the first great cause simply . . . but as the God of the Bible, Maker, Preserver, Governor, Redeemer, Judge, Father, Son and Holy Ghost." Pierce said that "to avoid controversy—to forestall objections, I would be content if the framers of our constitution in their appeal to God, would designate

37. Palmer, "The Rainbow Round the Throne," p. 25.

the Almighty as FATHER, SON and HOLY GHOST"³⁸ Clearly, to these southern minds, there could be no authentic "God of Nature" who was not the God of the primordial Christ.

It was precisely his inability to recognize this paradox that enabled Palmer in 1845 to proclaim, on the one hand, that "throughout this commonwealth of twenty-six States there is not one Protestant heart that desires an identification of the Church with the State." On the other hand, if American principles are to be perpetuated, it will not be because "our people are religious after *some* sort but after the *true* sort"³⁹

It is hardly to be wondered at, then, given the extent to which such notions abounded in the Civil War South, that the Reverend Thomas Smyth could proclaim of the South in 1860: ". . . to you is given the high and holy keeping, above all other conservators, of the Bible, the whole Bible, and nothing but the Bible; and of that liberty of conscience, free from the doctrines and commandments of men Upon this rock let the South build her house, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."⁴⁰ The southern Bible belt was being born.

ANCIENT PATRIARCHS

Because of the deep commitment of the South to the perpetuation of slavery, a profound reliance upon the Bible was a fundamental necessity. When the frontal attack from the abolitionists came, there were only two religious ideologies to which the South might turn for support for the peculiar institution. The natural rights tradition, as articulated in the Declaration of Independence, would not serve the cause of slavery; that was beyond dispute.⁴¹ The only option left was the Bible, nothing but the Bible, but in spite of the South's noblest intentions, not

38. George Foster Pierce, "Sermon Before the General Assembly of Georgia," 27 March 1863 (Milledgeville, Ga.: Doughton, Nisbet, and Barnes, State Printers, 1863), pp. 10-11, 13.

39. Palmer, "Influence of Religious Belief Upon National Character," pp. 27-28.

40. Smyth, "The Sin and the Curse," pp. 17-18.

41. If the "natural rights" tradition of the Declaration would not serve the cause of slavery, the "natural law" tradition of Roman Catholicism, adapted to the ante-bellum South, sometimes could. Thus, for example, Bishop John England of South Carolina, appealing to a host of Catholic thinkers, argued that while the institution of slavery resulted from sin and was introduced by "the law of nations," it nevertheless was "perfectly compatible with the natural law." Still, England admitted that he "would never aid in establishing it [slavery] where it did not exist." See England, "Letter II," 7 October 1840, in *Letters of the Late Bishop England to the Honorable John Forsyth, on the Subject of Domestic Slavery, 1844* (reprint ed. New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969), p. 23.

the whole Bible. Indeed, the one portion of the Bible upon which the southern clergy seized, transforming a simple narrative into a world-defining myth, was the story of Noah and his three sons, Ham, Shem, and Japheth. In a fundamental sense, this narrative became the soul of the civic theology of the South. From this perspective, race may not have been at the heart of the "religion of the Lost Cause," as Charles Wilson claims,⁴² but it certainly was at the heart of the southern civic theology before and during the war years.

The fundamental and mythical importance of the Ham narrative to many white Christians in the ante-bellum South has been demonstrated by Thomas Virgil Peterson in *Ham and Japheth: The Mythic World of Whites in the Antebellum South*. If it seems strange that white southerners would seize upon an obscure passage in Genesis 9, a passage only ten verses long, and elevate this passage to a mythical significance with virtual world-overturning power, two things must be remembered. First, Noah was interpreted as a patriarchal prototype who became the model for the patriarchal structure of plantation life.⁴³ Thus, when Thomas Cobb could write in 1858 that "Southern slavery is a patriarchal, social system. The master is the head of his family. Next to wife and children, he cares for his slaves. . . . In return, he is revered and held as protector and master," he implicitly was arguing that plantation masters had restored God's own form of social organization first inaugurated with the "grand old patriarch, Noah."⁴⁴ Further, Thomas Peterson's observation is significant that "as long as planters could view themselves as presiding over a patriarchal family, they could also view the atrocities of slavery as rare."⁴⁵ Second, but even more important than the southern identification of Noah as primal patriarch, was Noah's identification as primal man. The "Ham myth" could carry world-overturning power to many white southerners simply because Noah was seen as a virtual "new Adam" or, as one southern writer put it in 1860, "the father of the human family, the great representative of the race."⁴⁶ Further, it was through

42. Wilson, *Baptized in Blood*, p. 12.

43. Thomas Virgil Peterson, *Ham and Japheth: The Mythic World of Whites in the Antebellum South* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1978), p. 48.

44. Thomas Cobb, "An Inquiry into the Law of Negro Slavery in the United States of America," 1858 (reprint ed. New York: Negro Universities Press, 1968), cited in Peterson, *Ham and Japheth*, pp. 51-52.

45. Peterson, *Ham and Japheth*, p. 53.

46. *African Servitude: When, Why, and by Whom Instituted, by Whom and How Long Shall It be Maintained?* (New York: Davies and Kent, 1860), p. 5, cited in *ibid.*, p. 48.

this primordial man and his sons, Ham, Shem, and Japheth, that humankind had been divided into black, red, and white people, respectively. If, coming on the heels of this assumption, it could be shown that the primordial man/patriarch had pronounced the doom of perpetual bondage on the black race, southerners felt that they had an invincible case for black slavery, rooted in the primordium, itself.

Consequently, the Ham myth became a fundamental component of southern, white preaching during the ante-bellum period. Strangely enough, however, Peterson's fine analysis of the Ham myth during this period makes no reference to Benjamin Palmer's extensive use of this theme, in spite of Palmer's ministerial standing in the South. In 1861, Palmer stated the myth with clarity:

Upon Ham was pronounced the doom of perpetual servitude—proclaimed with double emphasis, as it is twice repeated that he shall be the servant of Japheth and the servant of Shem. Accordingly, history records not a single example of any member of this group lifting itself, by any process of self-development, above the savage condition. From first to last, their mental and moral characteristics, together with the guidance of Providence, have marked them for servitude; while their comparative advance in civilization and their participation in the blessings of salvation, have ever been suspended upon this decreed connexion with Japheth and with Shem.⁴⁷

In 1863, Palmer rooted both the myth and the South squarely in the patriarchal primordium. He told the South Carolina General Assembly that slavery had existed in many forms throughout the long course of human history. Palmer was astounded, however, that this particular time, of all times in human history, would be the occasion for a crusade against slavery. After all, he argued, it is only now in these latter days that slavery is "under precisely that patriarchal form in which it is sanctioned in the word of God, and in which it has never been found since the overthrow of the Hebrew empire, until now. . . ."⁴⁸ Not only was the North guilty, therefore, of "impeaching the Divine morality, and hurling their impious accusations against the integrity of God's rule,"⁴⁹ northerners also were guilty of impeding the southern restoration of the patriarchal primordium.

When he spoke before the Georgia legislature that same year, Palmer attempted to show that Jehovah, God of the Bible, who had spoken through the primordial patriarch and on whose side the South now fought, was far older than the more recent God

47. Palmer, "National Responsibility Before God," p. 8.

48. Palmer, "A Discourse Before the General Assembly of South Carolina," p. 13.

49. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

of Nature who presided over northern abolitionism. "I base the vindication of the South," he declared, "upon a far older record than the Declaration of 1776, and assert her rights under a more authoritative charter than the Federal compact." This ancient, authoritative code will be discovered "if we ascend the stream of history to its source" where "we shall discover God dividing the earth between the sons of Noah" Palmer was all too happy to "leave the Statesman to lay his hand upon the great instruments drawn up by our forefathers and from them to justify the South; but I ascend to that fundamental law, by which in the first organization of society God constituted civil government, and say that this law of separation is that 'law of nature and of nature's God which entitles us to assume a separate and equal station among the powers of the Earth.'"⁵⁰ Given the complete identification of southern slavery with the primordial patriarch, it is not at all surprising to hear Palmer urge the Georgia legislators "to stand as sentinels around Jehovah's throne, and to strike against those who have openly impeached his morality and denounced as profligate his government of the universe."⁵¹

When the war was over, Palmer continued to cling to the Ham myth, not to justify slavery, but to justify segregation. In an address delivered at Washington and Lee University in 1872, he told his comrades in the lost cause that "it is indispensable that the purity of race shall be preserved on either side The argument for this I base upon the declared policy of the Divine Administration from the days of Noah until now"⁵² This meant for Palmer that blacks should "stand apart in their own social grade, in their own schools, in their own ecclesiastical organizations, under their own teachers and guides."⁵³ He was confident, however, that this new system of racial segregation in the now defiled southern Eden would be softened and tempered by "all the kindness and helpful cooperation to which the old relations between the races, and their present dependence on each other, would naturally predispose." The details of segregation would be worked out "through the gradual changes of time, in the exercise of practical Anglo-Saxon sense, and under the direction of a wise providence which still binds the destinies of

50. Palmer, "Rainbow Round the Throne," pp. 31-32.

51. *Ibid.*, p. 39.

52. Palmer, "The Present Crisis and Its Issues" (Baltimore: John Murphy & Co., 1872), p. 18, an address delivered before the Literary Societies of Washington and Lee University, 27 June 1872.

53. *Ibid.*, p. 20.

the two together."⁵⁴

If Palmer's transition from defending slavery to defending segregation seems too easy a resolution of the lost cause, one should be reminded by Charles R. Wilson that defense of segregation was part of a much larger lost cause posture. Fundamental to that posture was the virtue of the white South, even in defeat.⁵⁵ While accepting God's judgment on southern pride⁵⁶ or on failure to adequately care for slaves,⁵⁷ southern ministers nonetheless held that the South had been virtuous on the issues of slavery and race.⁵⁸ Therefore, as Wilson expressed it, they were particularly concerned over "the obstacle that postbellum blacks presented to the preservation of a virtuous Southern civilization."⁵⁹ Thus, Palmer's apology for segregation did not represent an easy acceptance of what seemed to him second best, or an evaporation of his civic theology. Rather, given previous southern values, segregation was merely an adaptation of an older civic theology to a dramatically new situation. The primordial patriarch was the patron saint of the new position as well as of the old.

FOUNDING FATHERS

In spite of Palmer's consistent attacks upon the religious infidelity of the American founding fathers, he nevertheless praised their political wisdom and the republican institutions that they had established. The American model of republican government was, Palmer thought, a recovery of "primitive republicanism"⁶⁰ that had been unknown since "the simplicity of patriarchal times."⁶¹ Once again, however, a disastrous fall had occurred. Northerners first abandoned the creeds of the church; then, they perverted the Bible "into a sanction for all the utterances of an infidel philosophy"; and then the "transition was easy to a perverse criticism which should eviscerate the Constitution of all its meaning."⁶²

The gist of this political fall, Palmer contended, was the

54. Ibid., pp. 20-21.

55. Wilson, *Baptized in Blood*, p. 100.

56. Ibid., p. 61.

57. Ibid., pp. 68-69.

58. Ibid., p. 68.

59. Ibid., p. 100.

60. Palmer, "Our Historic Mission," p. 18.

61. Ibid., p. 11.

62. Palmer, "A Discourse Before the General Assembly of South Carolina," pp. 18-19.

inability or unwillingness of the northern people to understand the true idea of a republic. "They have confounded it with democracy" and have made "the voice of the people the voice of God; in exalting the will of the numerical majority above the force of constitution and covenants."⁶³ In so doing, northerners had broken the sacred political covenant, and the South's only crime lay in "a peaceful withdrawal from those who would not agree to walk with us in the faith and according to the covenants of our fathers."⁶⁴

When Palmer addressed the soldiers of the Washington Artillery in May 1861, he told the troops that they "contend today for the great American principle that all just government derives its powers from the will of the governed." This was the principle for which, "eighty-five years ago our fathers fought," and "it is the corner stone of the great temple which, on this continent, has been reared to civil freedom." Thus, he told the soldiers that they were off to fight in a holy war to prevent a total fall from primordial principles—"a war of civilization against a ruthless barbarism which would dishonor the dark ages."⁶⁵

Three years later, when Palmer addressed the Confederate soldiers from South Carolina, he told them that "we are then contending for the very principles of our fathers . . ." Then he elaborated: "And when my thoughts have followed the soldiers of our armies on their lonely march and on the field of strife, it has seemed to me that the spectres of those who suffered at Valley Forge had risen from their revolutionary bed to hover around you, and testify to you that you were contending for the principles for which they fought, and for which they willingly surrendered their lives."⁶⁶

Palmer sounded the theme of political restorationism in 1861 when he called on the South to "bring back the purer days of the republic."⁶⁷ In those purer days, rule was by covenant rather than by mob, and by Constitution rather than by party. Those days, however, were almost gone. Palmer observed that "when . . . party usurps the place of country [and] when public plat-

63. Ibid., p. 10.

64. Palmer, "Rainbow Round the Throne," p. 34.

65. Palmer, "Exhortation to the Washington Artillery," *New Orleans Daily Delta*, 29 May 1861, reprinted in Johnson, *The Life and Letters of Benjamin Morgan Palmer*, pp. 238-39.

66. Palmer, "Address to Soldiers of the Legion and Gentlemen of the Army," *Columbia, S.C. Daily Southern Guardian*, 10 June 1864, p. 1.

67. Palmer, "National Responsibility Before God," p. 18.

forms become . . . higher than the constitution and the law . . . : then may be seen the handwriting upon the wall, and the glory has departed"⁶⁸

The role of the South was therefore all the more significant, for she was the last, best hope for simple, primordial, republican government. "The last hope of self-government upon this Continent," Palmer proclaimed in 1860, "lies in these eleven Confederate States. We have retained the one, primary truth upon which the whole fabric of public liberty was reared by our fathers, and from which the North has openly apostalized."⁶⁹ In 1863, he contended that the Confederacy was "a last asylum for the genius of republicanism to work out, if possible, its promised blessings to the nations of the earth."⁷⁰ The success of primordial republicanism was clearly yoked, in Palmer's mind, to the perpetuation of primordial patriarchalism as embodied in the institution of slavery. He made this point unmistakably clear in 1864 when he argued that "the only hope of republican institutions on this continent, is to be found in the perpetuation of that institution which has been made the occasion of this war."⁷¹

When the war was over, Palmer's last, best hope for republican government was once again being threatened, though this time by "appalling corruption," "lawless Radicalism," "the ascendancy of a profligate Party, bestriding the neck of the nation," and "the secret suspicion . . . as to the impotency of Republican Institutions."⁷² Once again, Palmer's prescribed cure was a return to the political faith of the Founding Fathers. In an address at Washington and Lee University in 1872, Palmer observed that "in every case alike, the existence of regulated liberty will depend upon the maintenance of our Ancestral Faith. My earnest prayer in reference to our country, is, that its institutions may be preserved exactly as they came to us from a wise and patriotic ancestry."⁷³

CONCLUSION

Since, to Benjamin Palmer, the South was the last, best hope for primordial, republican government, it can hardly be surpris-

68. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

69. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

70. Palmer, "A Discourse Before the General Assembly of South Carolina," p. 12.

71. Palmer, "Address to Soldiers of the Legion and Gentlemen of the Army," p. 1.

72. Palmer, "The Present Crisis and Its Issues," pp. 13-14.

73. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

ing that for him the preservation of the South was a life and death issue of existential significance. He made this clear on a number of occasions. In 1863, he proclaimed: "Our country and our God! The two blend evermore in the Christian patriot's thought, and shall it be said there are no martyrdoms for the one, when the gibbet and the flame are welcomed for the other?"⁷⁴ In 1860, Palmer told his audience that the South "is in every sense my mother. I shall die upon her bosom—she shall know no peril, but it is my peril—no conflict, but it is my conflict—and no abyss of ruin, into which I shall not share her fall."⁷⁵

Armed and sustained with this religious devotion to his homeland, Palmer articulated for the Civil War South a civic theology of extraordinary scope. Not content simply to identify the South with the purposes of God in the abstract, Palmer rooted his argument in the concrete details of history. When he had finished, he had created a mythical South that was the fulfillment of five different sacred histories: ancient Israel, the ancient Jewish patriarchs, primitive Christianity, Puritan fathers, and founding fathers. This, for Palmer, was cosmos. Cosmos, however, trembled on the brink of chaos whose demonic agent was deistic infidelity. Here was civic theology that was even more than civic theology; it was cosmic drama with cosmic significance, acted out on a cosmic stage.

74. Palmer, "The Oath of Allegiance to the United States, Discussed in its Moral and Political Bearings" (Richmond: Macfarlane & Ferguson, 1863), pp. 26-27.

75. Palmer, "The South: Her Peril and Her Duty," in Johnson, *The Life and Letters of Benjamin Morgan Palmer*, p. 219.